IS SOCIOLOGICAL THEORY USEFUL IN NONACADEMIC EMPLOYMENT? THE VIEWS OF SOCIOLOGISTS, EMPLOYERS, AND FORMER STUDENTS

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This paper summarizes and critiques previous studies of the opinions of three groups (sociologists, nonacademic employers, and former sociology students) regarding the usefulness of sociological theory in nonacademic work. Existing studies show that: (1) most sociologists agree that sociological theory has much relevance to nonacademic employment; (2) nonacademic employers are somewhat skeptical and suspicious of the relevance of theoretical skills on the job; and (3) former sociology students have ambivalent opinions regarding the usefulness of theory to their careers. The paper concludes with a brief discussion of the origins of employer suspicions concerning sociology and a call for "truth in advertising" when sociologists discuss the marketability of sociology degrees with students.

Much has been written recently about the desirability of including applied courses in undergraduate and graduate sociology curricula (see DeMartini, 1980; Rossi, 1980; Berk, 1981; Grasmick et al., 1983; Green and Salem, 1983; Howery, 1983; Watts et al., 1983; Watts and Johnson, 1984; Freeman and Rossi, 1984; Kelly, 1986; Frey and Wright, 1987). This interest has resulted in a dramatic expansion in the number of applied courses offered in sociology departments. For example, Howery's (1983) study of applied sociology offerings on the undergraduate level indicates an increase in the number of departments which: (1) offer internship programs; (2) offer specific courses dealing with applied issues and nonacademic careers; and/or (3) integrate applied topics into existing courses. Similarly, DeMartini (1980) notes that while only 11% of the graduate sociology departments in the U.S. offered applied courses in 1970, 44% offered these courses by 1979. The increased emphasis placed on applied sociology courses is largely attributable to a desire to enhance the marketability of sociology degrees for students seeking nonacademic employment (Ruggiero and Weston, 1986; Frey and Wright, 1987).

There is a strong consensus among sociologists writing on the topic that applied courses should stress experience-based learning and methodological, statistical, and computer skills as preparation for nonacademic careers (Caro, 1983; Watts et al., 1983; Watts and Johnson, 1984; Daudistel and Hedderson, 1984; Freeman and Rossi, 1984; Frey and Wright, 1987). Somewhat less consensus, however, exists about the usefulness of sociological theory courses for nonacademic employment. This paper summarizes the research concerning the views of three groups (sociologists, nonacademic employers, and former sociology students) regarding the importance of theoretical skills in nonacademic jobs.

SOCIOLOGISTS: THE VIEW FROM THE IVORY TOWER

While most sociologists writing on the topic contend that sociological theory courses have considerable relevance to nonacademic employment, there are a few dissenters to this view. Unfortunately, this debate has largely been waged without the benefit of empirical research as few researchers have bothered to ask sociologists about their opinions regarding the specific job-related skills which theory courses provide (see Howery, 1983, for an exception).

Most sociologists who consider theory of importance to nonacademic employment emphasize that theoretical models are helpful in offering alternative solutions to applied problems (Denzin, 1970; Scott and Shore, 1974; Giles-Sims and Tuchfield, 1983; Johnson, 1983). Denzin (1970:127), for example, notes that all sociological theories "contain specifications for action in the real world." As a result, approaching a practical problem with a theory "increases the probability that [effective] applied action can follow" (Denzin, 1970:127). Similarly, Giles-Sims and Tuchfield (1983) contend that "theoretically grounded" research taken from academic sociology can suggest new possibilities in the implementation of programs and policies in nonacademic work.

Other sociologists maintain that some familiarity with organizational theory is especially helpful on the job (Scott and Shore, 1974; Adamek and Boros, 1983; Haber, 1983). Adamek and Boros (1983) suggest that organizational theory can be "very useful" in helping employees understand individual behavior in an organizational context. Haber (1983) more specifically argues that insights into the internal operations of bureaucracies offered by organizational theory are particularly crucial in the training of future program evaluators.

Finally, echoing the Millsian (1959) emphasis on the role of the "sociological imagination" in facilitating an understanding of the relationship between private troubles and public issues, several sociologists have stressed that theoretical skills help future nonacademic employees to become more critical and perceptive thinkers (Foote, 1974; Scott and Shore, 1974; Howery, 1983; Salem and Grabarek, 1986). For example, Scott and Shore (1974) contend that theoretical insight enables employees to subject the assumptions and structural features of proposals and programs to rigorous analysis and sensitizes employees to the complexities and subtleties of social life. Salem and Grabarek (1986:274) argue that theoretical skills help students "to develop creative abilities and to understand the broad sweep of history and the interdependence of the economic system with other social institutions," talents they assume are prized by employers. Finally, Howery (1983), in her survey of 34 sociology departments which offer applied courses, found that sociologists relate theoretical skills to "critical problem solving abilities" in nonacademic employment. Howery notes that theory courses are typically required in applied sociology programs because theory is useful for linking practical knowledge to planned social change. She concludes that "middle range" policy theories relating to substantive specialties are essential in applied sociology programs (Howery, 1983).

Howery's (1983) interpretations, though, are open to criticism because of inadequacies in her research design. Her recommendations for applied sociology programs are based solely on her survey of academic sociologists (Howery, 1983). However, it seems reasonable that the *consumers* of applied sociology (both nonacademic employers and former students) should also be consulted when formulating an applied sociology curriculum. Applied sociology is by definition "client-centered" (i.e., focused around employer needs) and *not* based on the theoretical concerns of the academic world (see Demerath, 1981a and 1981b). This recognition leads DeMartini (1980) to assert boldly that traditionally trained academic sociologists cannot automatically be relied on to teach applied sociology. Extending this observation to criticize Howery's study, perhaps traditionally trained academic sociologists alone cannot be expected to formulate an applied sociology curriculum that graduates marketable students.

Only a few sociologists have openly questioned the usefulness of theory in nonacademic employment. For example, while DeMartini (1980) and Giles-Sims and Tuchfield (1983) defend the importance of theory courses in applied sociology programs, they admit that applied sociology as actually practiced is largely

atheoretical. Furthermore, in their description of the applied sociology program at the University of Oklahoma, Grasmick et al. (1983:70) more bluntly contend that sociological theory "is not especially useful to [applied] students" and should be included in applied programs only to "promote departmental solidarity" and peace.

NONACADEMIC EMPLOYERS: THE VIEW FROM THE OFFICE SUITE

Employers who hire former sociology students show somewhat less enthusiasm for the use of sociological theory in applied settings. In their survey of 173 Texas nonacademic employers, Watts et al. (1983) and Watts and Johnson (1984) found that employers consider research methods and statistics as essential courses for sociology students, but rate sociological theory courses as "relatively unimportant." Even more revealing is Lyson and Squires (1982) survey of 65 nonacademic employers, all of whom employed as least one Ph.D. sociologist. Lyson and Squires (1982) found that while 89% of their respondents thought that research methods courses were important for the employment of sociology graduates and 78% thought that statistics courses were important, only 14% believed theory courses were important on the job.

Despite such findings, numerous sociologists (including Scott and Shore, 1974; Howery, 1983; Watts and Johnson, 1984; Ruggiero and Weston, 1986; Salem and Grabarek, 1986) curiously conclude that many nonacademic employers desire certain skills (e.g., critical thinking ability and creativity) that theory courses can teach. However, this conclusion appears to be an artifact of the way survey researchers phrase their questions. For example, Watts and Johnson (1984, emphasis added) asked employers: "What skills do you *expect* when hiring sociology graduates?" In response, 81% of the employers said "writing ability," 70% said "taking initiative," 69% said "critical thinking," 54% said "leadership ability," and 51% said "creativity" (Watts and Johnson, 1984). However, Watson's (1982, emphasis added) national survey of 249 employers elicited much different responses when he asked a slightly different question: "What skills do you most *need* when hiring sociology students?" Watson's (1982) employer respondents ranked the following skills in order of importance: (1) counseling ability; (2) writing and editing ability; (3) mathematical skills; (4) statistical skills; (5) business skills; (6) program evaluation skills; (7) personnel skills; and (8) computer skills. Comparing the Watts and Johnson (1984) and Watson (1982) studies, employers seem to be suggesting

they *expect* sociology students to have theoretical skills (e.g., critical thinking ability and creativity) but they *want* sociology students with writing, quantitative, and personnel skills.

The latter interpretation is further supported by two additional findings from Watts and Johnson's (1984) study. First, only four of their 173 employer respondents reported they actually *recruit* sociology graduates. Second, only six employers rated sociology graduates as "attractive" employees. Graduates of 14 other college majors had higher "attractiveness" rankings than sociology graduates, including the residual category "other major" (Watts and Johnson, 1984). Employers on surveys often volunteered unflattering remarks indicating low toleration for sociology and critical thinking sociology students were said to have "attitude problems" and to be "liberal bleeding-hearts" and "not in touch with the reality of the business world" (Watts and Johnson, 1984:196). In a remarkable understatement, Watts and Johnson (1984:196) conclude that the "reputation of sociology students is less than outstanding in the eyes of our [nonacademic employer] respondents."

FORMER SOCIOLOGY STUDENTS: THE VIEW FROM THE JOB

Studies of former sociology students now employed in nonacademic settings reveal an ambivalence toward the usefulness of sociological theory in the working world (Lutz, 1979; Adamek and Boros, 1983; Stevens and Reynolds, 1983; Jacoby et al., 1984; Ruggiero and Weston, 1986). Two factors probably contribute to this ambivalence: (1) recent sociology graduates must compete in a tight job market holding a degree which many employers view with disdain; and (2) once employed, many former sociology students undoubtedly experience intense "antitheoretical" work socialization (exemplified by the veteran cop who advises rookies to "forget everything you learned in the police academy").

Several studies have documented the woeful state of the current job market for sociology degree holders (for reviews of this literature, see Ruggiero and Weston, 1986; Frey and Wright, 1987). For example, while research indicates that most recent sociology bachelor's alumni are employed (Hedley and Adams, 1982; Stevens and Reynolds, 1983; Ruggiero and Weston, 1986), one study showed that a *majority* were not employed in the types of jobs they desired and expected following graduation (Stevens and Reynolds, 1983). Furthermore, Huber (1984) estimates that between 15-20% of all recent sociology bachelor's degree graduates are underemployed, performing jobs which do not require college degrees.

Several studies of recent sociology bachelor's alumni suggest that many wish their sociology courses had emphasized "practical" issues more and theory less (Lutz, 1979; Hedley and Adams, 1982; Stevens and Reynolds, 1983). For example, Lutz's (1979:386) survey of recent sociology graduates at the University of Northern Iowa revealed that numerous former students wish their "education had been more applied than they perceived it to have been." Likewise, Stevens and Reynolds (1983:9) survey of recent sociology graduates of Winona State University uncovered what the authors poignantly characterize as "a plea for greater career emphasis within undergraduate education." In the Stevens and Reynolds (1983) survey, respondents urged the following revisions in the sociology program: (1) greater emphasis on career counseling; (2) more extensive use of internships; (3) the introduction of applied sociology courses into the curriculum; and (4) the integration of "real world" experiences into theory courses. Other studies reveal that former students consider career counseling, management training, public speaking, and computer programming as important skills for which a sociology bachelor's degree offers insufficient preparation (Jacoby et al., 1984; Ruggiero and Weston, 1986).

Somewhat more support for the importance of sociological theory is found among former graduate students who hold nonacademic jobs. For example, Adamek and Boros' (1983) survey of Kent State University M.A. and Ph.D. alumni working in nonacademic positions revealed that a majority felt that *both* methods and theory courses were "useful" on the job. While methods courses were rated "more useful" than theory courses by both M.A. and Ph.D. graduates, only 10% of the M.A. and 11% of the Ph.D. respondents rated theory courses "not useful" (Adamek and Boros, 1983).

SUMMARY AND DISCUSSION

Summarizing the studies reviewed in this paper, it appears that: (1) nonacademic employers are somewhat skeptical and suspicious of the skills which theory courses teach sociology students; (2) sociology alumni have ambivalent attitudes regarding the usefulness of theory in their careers; and (3) sociologists are the only ones largely convinced that theory courses have much relevance to nonacademic employment.

Because nonacademic employers are ultimately the ones who make the bread-and-butter decisions to hire, their suspicions of sociology students in general and sociological theory in particular deserve further comment. Employer suspicions are rooted in

stereotypes that are legacies of the popularity of sociology as a major among college students in the late 1960s and early 1970s (Wright, 1985; Ruggiero and Weston, 1986). Numerous writers agree that employers persist in stereotyping sociology students as "liberal bleeding-hearts" and even "out and out radicals" (Smith, 1983; Sorensen, 1983; Watts and Johnson, 1984; Ruggiero and Weston, 1986).

Opinions of sociologists regarding the usefulness of theory in nonacademic employment also deserve additional comment. Sociologists currently seem to be in the proverbial position of "wanting their cake and eating it too" when it comes to making students more marketable. Many sociologists writing on applied curricula contend that students can be made more marketable without significant revisions to "core" sociology courses such as methods, theory, and substantive areas (see DeMartini, 1980; Howery, 1983; Freeman and Rossi, 1984; Jacoby et al., 1984; McMillian and McKinney, 1985). Because this "status quo" approach has failed to produce marketable students in the immediate past, however, it is wishful thinking to believe it will succeed in the near future.

Admittedly, even with dramatic applied curricular revisions, it is unlikely that sociology students will soon rival the fondness for business students in the hearts of nonacademic employers. A telling finding from Watts and Johnson's (1984:196) study demonstrates this point. When asked what sociology faculty could do to make their students more marketable, some nonacademic employers bluntly responded: "Tell students to change their major to business" (or "computer science" or "engineering").

It is perhaps time for sociologists to adopt a "truth in advertising" credo when discussing the marketability of sociology degrees with students. Sociologists should encourage students to major in sociology not because future employers will admire their critical thinking abilities and reward them with large paychecks, but because students find the subject matter intrinsically interesting. When defending the importance of sociological theory to students, honesty requires that sociologists revise the Socratic observation from Plato's "Apology" with some painful evidence from recent research: The unexamined life is not fit for human living, but it certainly pays better.

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